United Nations E/CN.3/2000/15

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
11 January 2000

Original: English

Statistical Commission
Thirty-first session
29 February-3 March 2000
Item 7 of the provisional agenda*
Coordination of development indicators in the context of follow-up to United Nations conferences and summits, including capacity-building

Harmonization and rationalization of development indicators in the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirtieth session.[1] It describes the activities of the United Nations Statistics Division in support of a special session of the Economic and Social Council dedicated to the topic of basic indicators in the context of conference follow-up.

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1999, Supplement No. 4* (E/1999/24), chap. I.B.

* E/CN.3/2000/1.

00-20490 (E) 120100

1. The Economic and Social Council, in its deliberations on the theme "Integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up of major United Nations conferences and summits" at its substantive session of 1998, recognized the importance of the issue of statistics and indicators. In its decision 1998/290, the Council decided to hold an informal meeting of the Council with panels of experts to consider in a comprehensive manner the work being carried out by the United Nations system and other relevant international and national institutions on basic indicators to measure progress towards the implementation of the integrated and coordinated follow-up of all aspects, of the major United Nations conferences and summits, including means of implementation, in the economic, social and related fields at all levels, with a view, as a first step, to taking stock and identifying overlapping duplication and gaps. The Council requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report in preparation for the meeting.

2. At its thirty-second session, in June 1998, the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities also considered the issue of indicators. It took note of and agreed with the proposals by the United Nations Statistics Division to also begin work on rationalization and harmonization through the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) process on indicators for the common country assessment, and to continue its work with the core indicators programme of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Subcommittee noted that harmonization was necessarily an incremental process (see ACC/1998/14, para. 2(a)).

3. In the context of the indicator work, the United Nations Statistics Division, in close cooperation with United Nations departments, agencies, funds and programmes as well as non-United Nations entities and Member States, prepared the comprehensive and analytical report requested by the Council, drafts of which were discussed at the thirtieth session of the Statistical Commission, in March 1999, and at a meeting of international experts on indicators held in New York from 8 to 10 March 1999. The Division also participated in the UNDAF process to review and revise the list of development indicators to be used in the common country assessment. The Division undertook missions to three UNDAF countries with the objective of assessing their capacity to produce the indicators required for the UNDAF common country assessment and to assess the quality of the data provided.

4. As an initiative to harmonize indicators produced and disseminated by the United Nations system, the United Nations Statistics Division designed the database framework and developed the development indicator web site (http://domino.un.org/indicator.nsf). The Division inputted the information related to the production and dissemination of its indicators, and worked with the initial three agencies (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Labour Organization, and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) to include similar information on their indicators.

5. The Statistical Commission, at its thirtieth session, in 1999, reviewed United Nations Statistics Division activities linked to the harmonization of indicators and welcomed the role that the Division had played as honest broker in the inter-agency working group on indicators for common country assessment in the UNDAF process.[1] The Commission also urged international agencies to work towards harmonizing and rationalizing the various sets of indicators being used at the international level, including the use of common definitions and methods, and called on the agencies to improve coordination in collecting information in order not to overburden countries.[1]

6. On 10 and 11 May 1999, the informal meeting of the Council was held in New York, with high-level panelists from UNESCO, the Economic Commission for Europe, the Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Development Programme, OECD, the World Bank and the Department for Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, as well as country experts, who validated the findings of the analytical report. Both the report of the meeting (E/1999/11) and a summary prepared by the President of the Council (E/1999/77) have been made available to the Commission as background documents.

7. In section II of its resolution 1999/55, entitled "Basic indicators for the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major conferences and summits at all levels", the Council welcomed efforts already undertaken by the various bodies of the

United Nations system to harmonize and rationalize the basic indicators used in the context of follow-up to United Nations conferences, and encouraged them to continue their efforts in order to lessen the burden on Member States.

8. In paragraph 13 of its resolution 1999/55, the Council requested the United Nations Secretariat, in particular the United Nations Statistics Division, to serve as a focal point to promote networking among national and international institutions in the area of statistics and indicators relating to the follow-up of United Nations conferences and summits. In paragraph 18 of the same resolution, the Council invited the Statistical Commission, in close cooperation with other relevant bodies of the United Nations system, to review the work undertaken in harmonizing and rationalizing basic indicators in the context of follow-up to United Nations conferences and summits and to identify a limited number of common indicators from among those currently accepted and widely used by United Nations Member States.

9. At its thirty-third session, in September 1999, the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities reviewed Council resolution 1999/55 and related United Nations Statistics Division activities; welcomed the Division's proposed programme of activities, emphasizing the importance of statistical capacity-building and the involvement of users; and agreed to participate in the completion of the development indicator web page project (see ACC/1999/19, paras. 2 (c) and 16).

10. To follow up these decisions and recommendations, the United Nations Statistics Division is planning to strengthen its efforts in the field of statistical capacity and common indicators. In particular, the Division is planning to undertake the following activities:

(a) To continue to work with the United Nations Development Group on the implementation of the indicator framework for the common country assessment. The objectives are to involve in the discussion the United Nations specialized agencies and representatives of the country statistical systems, and to carry out an in-depth analysis to assess the quality and completeness of national applications of the common country assessment indicator framework;

(b) To continue to work with countries, international organizations and agencies of the United Nations system in the harmonization of common indicators;

(c) To work with OECD on the development of indicators on means of implementation;

(d) To identify, through selected country visits, countries' capacity to respond to the requests of international agencies in terms of burden imposed on countries' reporting systems, quality of data produced and deviation from other national priorities;

(e) To undertake a comprehensive analysis of the statistical requirements originated by the monitoring needs of the recent international conferences and summits, and to compare these requirements with the actual statistical capacity of the countries. The objectives are:

(i) To identify gaps in the availability of the data at the national and international levels;

(ii) To analyse the quality of the produced data in terms of relevance, timeliness, coverage, accessibility and methods used;

(iii) To identify priority areas where statistical assistance is more needed;

(f) To support statistical capacity-building in order to promote the countries to routinely produce relevant data. The Division is planning to use its regular and extrabudgetary resources to support regional networks with the aim of providing assistance to countries in a more cost-effective way and establishing forums for exchanging statistical experiences and expertise among countries. Building on successful experiences, the Division will promote the development of national statistical master plans. The component of technical assistance will be identified within the objectives expressed into the national master plans;

(g) To continue to work with United Nations organizations in the production of the development indicators web site. The objective is to complete the web site with metadata information related to indicators which are produced and disseminated for the follow-up of international conferences and summits by all organizations within the United Nations system. Such a web site will:

(i) Identify common international sources of indicators used to monitor international conferences and summits;

(ii) Provide a comprehensive reference system for the indicators used and produced in the

follow-up of international conferences and summits;

(iii) Identify areas where the data collection capabilities of countries need to be strengthened;

(iv) Identify overlaps in data collection, and close associations, gaps and inconsistencies among the various sets of indicators.

11. The Statistical Commission may wish to:

(a) Comment on the implications of Economic and Social Council resolution 1999/55 for future work of the Commission in the field of indicators;

(b) Critically review the activities proposed by the United Nations Statistics Division;

(c) Consider what further cooperative efforts may be undertaken in support of Council resolution 1999/55.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1999, Supplement No. 4* (E/1999/24), para. 92 (c).